

GENDER BASED EXPERIENCES OF JEWISH WOMEN IN THE HOLOCAUST

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Martha May", is written over a horizontal line.

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### ABSTRACT

The cataclysm of the Holocaust has been documented and analyzed. What has not been fully explored, however, is the special character of women's experiences in the tragedy. This thesis explores the importance of gender through distinctive women: those who worked in the resistance, women who went into hiding and those who lived in the concentration camps. Personal testimonies show what set women apart from their male counterparts in the Holocaust. The thesis concludes that gender served as an important determinant of life, the quality of life and the manner of death.

The piecework of cloth, faded and worn, feels delicate in my hands. The ribbons used as straps have become frayed. It sends a chill down my spine holding this piece of material. It was made over fifty years ago: a place called auschwitz its origin. A brassiere, so primitive and simple. The woman may have rationed a day's worth of bread for use of a needle to sew it together. All to fashion a simple undergarment. It offered no physical support, but instead an enormous emotional one. A fundamental attempt at retaining femininity in the face of death.

One of the most shocking and horrifying events in modern history, the Holocaust, occurred in Europe from 1933-45. During this time, an estimated eleven million people perished at the hands of the Nazis. Of these eleven million people, six million Jews became victims of Hitler's Final Solution of annihilation of 'inferior' races.

Reports on the atrocities committed by the Nazis during and immediately following the war, to say the least, were sparse in nature. It was hard, maybe even impossible, for a rational human being to comprehend that such overt actions of cruelty and genocide could have been happening in the civilized world. People found it much easier to just shut out the horror than to deal face to face with the violence inflicted on one human being by another.

Fortunately, victims of the Holocaust found the courage to speak up and let their stories be told. It is through survivors' testimonies that the public gains knowledge as to what actually happened in places such as Auschwitz and Dachau. By having access to books including Diary of a Young Girl, by Anne Frank, people can learn about the attempts of families and individuals trying to live normal lives while in hiding from the Nazis. Women and men who sacrificed their lives through their work in the resistance movement are remembered in personal accounts about their struggles.

A large segment of the population targeted by the Nazis for extermination included European Jewish women. The women came from all different countries, backgrounds and families, but shared two important characteristics -- their race and their gender. Although the personal experiences of Jewish women within the Reich differed, especially if they spent time in hiding, worked in the resistance, or became interned in the camps, a common bond united them all: how does a woman preserve her femininity during the struggle for survival? For the most part, women accomplished holding on to their identities as females despite many obstacles in their way. In some cases it helped women survive, in others it led to their deaths. Ultimately, every Jewish woman's life course was altered forever due to the experiences she encountered at the hands of the Nazis.

## I. Women in the Resistance

Throughout the Holocaust, a popular, but incorrect notion that has arisen revolves around the idea that all the Jewish people succumbed to Nazi tyranny without a fight and ultimately were led like sheep to the slaughter. Authors such as Hannah Arendt suggest that Jewish leaders, instead of helping their people, actually led them further into the turmoil by cooperating with the authorities in charge of the annihilation of the Jews.<sup>1</sup> Historical testimonies, however, document groups of Jews who participated in active resistance to the implementation of the Final Solution. Women performed specific and integral roles in the resistance movement.

Women, contrary to popular belief, played an important role in activities of the resistance. Vera Laska addresses the point by commenting that, "another misconception that obscures the truth is that resistance activities were exclusively male undertakings."<sup>2</sup> The point must be well taken, for as on other operations, certain jobs present themselves that only a woman can fulfill.

One of the hardest of the female dominated jobs in the resistance involved fraternizing with the Nazis in order to gain information. By using a little feminine persuasion, they could receive details not available through the regular, male dominated espionage channels. Women worked within the social constructs of female inferiority, using them to their advantage. It was also easier for women to access information because many

times they were less suspect to committing acts which were not legal, based upon the prevailing nineteenth century stereotypes of the pious and virtuous woman. Women used males' underestimation of "the power of a woman" to their advantage.<sup>3</sup>

Prostitution became one of the most daring endeavors that women utilized in their fight for the resistance.<sup>4</sup> It was also one of the more painful duties that women accepted for the cause. They not only faced the danger of being exposed or slipping up on a daily basis, but they were also stigmatized and condemned by the Jewish community at large who remained unaware of their ulterior motives. The punishment by the community women faced for their supposed betrayal included being taught a lesson in loyalty by having their heads shaved.<sup>5</sup> The pain of knowing what they were doing was right while at the same time looking as though they were betraying their people weighed heavily on the minds of these women.

Jewish women practiced prostitution with the Nazis, and in particular, members of the SS, with little problem for two important reasons. At the beginning of the enforcement of anti-Jewish law, under the leadership of Adolph Hitler, Jewish women were not subjected to the same punishment for intercourse among different races as their male counterparts. Raul Hilberg, in his book, The Destruction of the European Jews, attempts to explain the incongruity of Hitler's thinking. "It may have been a sense of chivalry, or more likely the belief that women were very weak individuals without wills of their own."<sup>6</sup> In any case, at least until the deportations started in 1939, Jewish

women continued to fraternize with the Nazis with comparative ease.

As conditions for Jews within the Reich worsened, Jewish women resorted to using falsified papers in order to continue their resistance work. Although a complex and dangerous process, many women successfully lived among the Nazis undetected. For some women it was easier than others due to their Aryan characteristics-- light complexions and blonde hair. One such young woman lived in Germany throughout the war with forged papers allowing her to sabotage the German munitions factory where she worked.<sup>7</sup>

A more positive role women played in the resistance came in their job as temporary mothers to children seeking refuge from the Nazis. A vital mission of the resistance dealt with the mobilization and smuggling of Jewish children out of occupied territories before the deportations began. At a time of fear and confusion for many of the children, Jewish women assumed visual roles to offer comfort, leadership and love to children at one of the most traumatic points in their young lives.

By 1940, the Jewish resistance formally set up a separate branch of operations specifically dealing with the smuggling of Jewish children out of occupied territories. The O.S.E. (Relief Organization for Children), an outgrowth of a Jewish medical institution in Russia before World War I, now expanded its operations in numerous European countries dealing with the welfare of Jewish children.<sup>8</sup> As was the case in so many of the rescue operations, women remained essential to the smuggling



journeys.

Andree Salomon, one of the women directly involved with the O.S.E., took charge of groups of children smuggled over the mountains into Switzerland. Her colleague in the resistance movement, Anny Latour, remembers Salomon as a:

Courageous woman! When I see her now, it is just as she was during the Occupation, when our paths would occasionally cross. She had always a keen eye; one senses the same dynamic quality emanating from her now accompanied by that energetic voice which becomes tenderly maternal when speaking of 'her children'.<sup>9</sup>

The description gives the impression of the dual role the women responsible for the children's livelihood played. They expressed strength and courage while at the same time giving comfort and tenderness to the children during the rough transitions of their young lives.

In addition to these traditionally female roles, Jewish women served in great capacity in gender neutral jobs within the resistance. They manned the short wave radios, produced photographs, published documents contradicting the Nazi propaganda and forged documents.<sup>10</sup> Especially as the war escalated and men increasingly became targets for deportation to labor camps, women took over the vacated positions.

Among the most dangerous jobs women performed, the courier, also became the one of the most demanding. Every time these women walked out onto the street they were taking their lives in their hands. The Polish Resistance leader, Jan Karski, pays tribute to these women whom he hails as the unsung heroes of the war. According to Karski:

[Women] were better suited for undercover or conspiratorial

work because they were quicker to perceive danger, more optimistic of the outcome and could make themselves less conspicuous; they were more cautious and discreet, had more common sense and were less inclined to risky bluffing.<sup>11</sup>

The women found new and inventive ways to move their goods around. One resistance worker smuggled one million francs in the bosom of her dress.<sup>12</sup>

Not all Jewish resistance activities originated in Europe. One of the largest operations involving Jews, the Palestinian Jewish parachute missions, began recruiting members in 1942. The partisans became members of the British Army and were responsible for helping the resistance and getting army personnel out of enemy territory. Among the members of the mission a twenty three year old Hungarian Jewess stands out: her name, Hannah Senesh.

Senesh grew from a carefree teenager to a strong woman in five short years. She left Hungary in 1939, alone for the first time in her life, to work on a kibbutz in Palestine. During her first year in Palestine she matured in rapid fashion. However, she still showed the signs of a confused teenager which was evident from her diary entry of May 18 in which she talked about her self-esteem, the world around her and boys all in one paragraph.<sup>14</sup>

The growth process sped up when Senesh entered the parachute mission program. She faced days of apprehension where, as the only female member of the mission, she felt as though she would not be able to compete with her male counterparts. Her worries soon left her, however, when she

realized that this was the goal she fought so hard to determine ever since she left Hungary.<sup>15</sup>

After her capture behind enemy lines in 1944, Senesh proved herself wrong in regard to her will-power when she remained silent under torture while male members of the mission capitulated under the pressure. She proved unmovable much to the disgust of her Nazi captors. Only when she saw her mother for the first time did Senesh finally break down.

Although she dedicated her life to the parachute mission, her family and their well-being remained Senesh's top priority and foremost in her thoughts. The strength of her family bonds could not be broken. While imprisoned, her mother, Catherine, was also arrested. Upon seeing her mother, "she completely broke down, somehow tore herself away from her captors and launched herself at Catherine just as she had done as a child."<sup>16</sup> Even though she was in the process of becoming a martyr for her cause, Senesh still needed the comfort and protection of her mother, at least in an emotional sense.

At the young age of twenty-three, Hannah Senesh gave up her life for the Jewish cause. She was not alone in this respect. Thousands of women, caught in their resistance work and deported to places like Ravensbruck and Auschwitz, later lost their lives in the camps. The Nazis shot others on the spot because of their resistance activities. Niuta Teitelboim was captured and executed, but not before she killed two Gestapo agents unassisted in cold blood.<sup>17</sup>

Many causes can be offered as to why women became involved

in resistance activities. Pushed into action by watching their husbands taken away from them, women came forward and took the men's places in Jewish society, including the resistance. Jewish women were "fighting not only for physical survival, but also for the survival of Judaism."<sup>18</sup> Just as a mother struggles to save her child from death, so the Jewish woman of the resistance fought for the survival of her race.

## II. Women in Hiding

Until 1941, opportunities still existed for Jews to leave areas occupied by the Reich. In the fall of 1941, however, since Germany was now involved in a full scale war, the Nazis no longer permitted emigrations.<sup>19</sup> Forced evacuations sped up and more and more ghettos and concentration camps developed to house the Jews of German occupied Europe. The situation, becoming most desperate, left few choices for Jews to survive.

Many Jews chose to go into hiding to try to avoid the deportations. Hilberg, in The Destruction of the European Jews, cites the statistics for Jews who went into hiding:

September 11, 1942	25,000
March 20, 1942	10,000-15,000
June 25, 1943	20,000
February 11, 1944	11,000 <sup>20</sup>

Of the thousands of Jews who decided to go into hiding instead of facing deportation, a great number included women.

Each of these women's stories was unique in its own way.

Sacrifices and uncertainty reigned in the world of the Jewish woman in hiding. Such emotions were powerfully documented by the most famous person to go into hiding during World War II, Anne Frank. Through her diary from June 12, 1942 until her capture by the authorities on August 4, 1944, Frank wrote as a girl trying to grow up in an artificial and restrictive environment. Her writings evolve from those of a young girl of twelve, rambling about boys and parties to thoughts of a young woman just fifteen trying to rationalize and explain the complexities of the surroundings under which she lives.

Anne Frank expressed many confused adolescent feelings during her stay in the 'secret annexe'. She was curious and wanted to learn about love. Her changes can be traced through her writings. Her first entry about the boy Peter stated, "What a fool!"<sup>21</sup> Slowly, a great friendship blossomed between the two of them. Anne was quick to point out, however:

But you musn't think that I'm in love with Peter- not a bit of it. If the vP's [van Pel's] had had a girl instead of a boy, I should have tried to tell her something about myself and to let her tell me things as well.<sup>22</sup>

Anne's longing fell more to companionship than to love.

The feelings Anne had towards Peter stemmed from the fact that she felt cut off from her family in hiding. She had problems with her mother and her sister Margot. One of the early entries of Anne's diary described the feelings she had about her family. "I don't fit in with them [her mother and Margot]...I would rather be on my own."<sup>23</sup> Being locked up in hiding only added to the frustration Anne felt towards her

family, especially her mother. The only member of the family Anne ever felt comfortable with was her father.

The uneasiness around her mother and Margot escalated throughout their tenure in the 'secret annexe'. On October 30, 1942, Anne commented, "I love them, but only because they are Mummy and Margot, as human beings they can both hang."<sup>24</sup> Later she tried to rationalize such statements by explaining that in ordinary circumstances when she felt this way she would be able to go off by herself, calm down and then come back. Living in the cramped quarters, however, there was no means of escape.<sup>25</sup>

Menstruation marks both a physical and emotional turning point from a girl to a woman. Anne Frank noted her happiness in the expectation of her first period in her diary entry on October 20, 1942. "I can hardly wait, it seems so important to me, it's only a pity that I shan't be able to wear sanitary towels because you can't get them anymore."<sup>26</sup> Later in her diary she expressed deeper feelings about the changes in her body:

I think what is happening to me is wonderful, and not only what can be seen on my body, but all that is taking place inside...Each time I have a period, (and that has only been three times) I have the feeling that in spite of all the pain, unpleasantness and nastiness I have a sweet secret, and that is why although it is nothing but a nuisance to me in one sense of the word, I always long for the time that I shall feel that secret within me again.<sup>27</sup>

Anne, always curious, longed for someone to talk to about this most private and yet fascinating aspect of womanhood.

Her change to womanhood was undermined by the lack of privacy in the 'secret annexe'. Anne's father attempted to

— alleviate some of the lack of privacy by devising a small, separate toilet facility Anne could use. It became especially useful during the times that the regular plumbing could not be used. Anne saw this as only a small inconvenience compared with the fact that there were days when she had to sit still and not talk all day.<sup>28</sup>

Although they lived in hiding, inhabitants of the 'secret annexe' knew of the activities of the outside world. Anne commented on the world around her and sometimes felt guilt for being in hiding while other Jews faced deportation to concentration camps. She described watching a group of Jews being herded through the street by writing, 'it was a horrible feeling, just as if I'd betrayed them and was now watching them in their misery.'<sup>29</sup>

There were also times, along with the guilt, that Anne felt their whole experience in hiding was for naught. The feelings were shared by other members of the annexe and Anne wrote of this in her diary entry of May 26, 1944:

Again and again I ask myself, would it not have been better for us all if we had not gone into hiding and if we were dead now and not going through all this misery, especially as we should be sparing the others. But we all shrink away from that too, for we still love life; we haven't forgotten the voice of nature, we still hope, hope about everything.<sup>30</sup>

Many times in her diary, Anne brought a positive message out of the despair that she felt. Although many times she seemed ready to give up, a spark was always relighted within her.

Scholars have also noticed the positive attitude that Anne usually found in a otherwise dark situation. Ernst Schnabel

comments, "Anne, though perfectly aware of the precariousness of their situation, had a great deal of confidence, a great trust in the future."<sup>31</sup> Her strong will and independence asserted itself through her talk of the future.

Although other people that knew Anne during her time in the 'secret annexe' referred to her as a child, she felt as though she had grown into a young woman, at the young age of fourteen. On March 7, 1944 she wrote:

Then in the second half of 1943, I became a young woman an adult in body and my mind underwent a great change I came to know God...I no longer had idle dreams, I had myself.<sup>32</sup>

Throughout this great and momentous point in her life her only friend in the 'secret annexe' with whom she could share all the trials and tribulations of growing up consisted of a simple diary.

Anne liked to think of herself as a grown-up woman, but there were times when the frightened child came out. Anne became especially vulnerable during bombing raids. "Sometimes her nerves would give way completely and she could not grow calmer until he [Otto Frank] took her into his bed."<sup>33</sup> Anne wrote on July 26, 1943, that she was up until after two in the morning due to bombs, going back and forth to her father's room the entire time.<sup>34</sup> She tried very hard to be mature, but natural childhood tendencies exposed themselves during times of extreme fear and crisis.

The discovery of the 'secret annexe' by the authorities in August, 1944, came as a great shock to everyone. Otto Frank



recalls:

She [Anne] was very quiet and composed, only just as dispirited as the rest of us. Perhaps that is why she did not think to take along her notebooks...But perhaps, too, she had a premonition that all was lost now, everything, and so she walked back and forth and did not even glance at her diary.<sup>35</sup>

Anne Frank managed to survive twenty-five months within the confines of the 'secret annexe'. She dealt with feelings of loneliness, alienation from her family and confusion about love. But she could not survive the conditions of Bergen-Belsen, where she died just weeks prior to the liberation.

It is interesting to note that the most famous writer to come out of the Holocaust is a teenage girl. Why does Anne Frank invoke such great interest? It stems from the fact that Anne wrote in a clear, poetic style about the world around her, including the day to day activities of the inhabitants of the 'secret annexe'. She conveys the fact that normal people became the targets of the Nazis. What makes Anne Frank so fascinating, however, is the childhood innocence, that hope for the future and the goodness that she finds in mankind despite the conditions she is forced to live under.

Unlike Anne Frank, who for the most part maintained a stable and somewhat comfortable life while in hiding, some women's experiences in hiding were haphazard and dehumanizing. The conditions that women lived under, were, to say the least, subhuman. The courage and perseverance of these women comes through in the testimonies they have given about the experiences.

Marilla Feld tells of how she lived on the run from 1939 until the end of the war. Never knowing when or where the next refuge would be, she took her life into her hands every day. Among the places that Marilla stayed while on the run included a pigsty, sleeping on park benches and taking up with an old German officer while hiding behind forged documents.<sup>36</sup>

Feld met and married a young Polish Jew while trying unsuccessfully to cross the border. After becoming separated from him, she took it upon herself to find shelter anywhere she possibly could. Having lost her husband and knowing in the back of her mind that she would probably never see her family again, Feld faced an indescribable feeling of despair and an utter sense of being alone.<sup>37</sup> She no longer existed as a woman, but was reduced to life like an animal, dehumanized in spite of herself.

Women in hiding many times took the attitude that everyday that they lived would be their last. A woman never knew what would happen next and that ultimately played on their will to live. As Feld so eloquently explains it:

For me every day was an eternity...I was forever cold and underfed and, worst of all, so very lonely. The not knowing, the infinite uncertainty of what was in the future and how long my torture would last, nearly drove me mad. I really wanted to die.<sup>38</sup>

The uncertainty that Feld commented on was shared by other women in hiding. Along with losing the freedom to socialize and meet other people their own age, a commonplace activity for young adults under normal circumstances, "living in hiding was naturally an enormous strain and tension for people."<sup>39</sup> Ronnie Goldstein-van Cleef states that after being found out and

transferred to a concentration camp, there was a sense of relief among her group because at least now the wait was over and they could actually deal face to face with their fate. Other women were there to share their experiences and alleviate some of the loneliness which accompanied her time in hiding. She goes on to say that her first night in the camp she slept well because a burden she had been living under for years had finally been lifted.<sup>40</sup>

Bloeme Evers-Emden recalls how traumatic living in hiding could be to a young woman in her twenties. She feels that the psychological hardships, including living without physical or emotional love have been overlooked. She remembers living in hiding meant, "a loss of identity, occupation, your own context, your family, possessions."<sup>41</sup> She also expressed a sense of relief upon her capture for now she could use her own name and felt as though she had regained her true identity, not only her name, but her identity as a woman.<sup>42</sup>

Most people that went into hiding did not go with their entire family as the Frank's. One of the hardest things emotionally to deal with came with the fact that a person may very well be saying goodbye to their family for the last time. The separation was especially hard on mothers giving up their children. In the film Au Revoir Les Enfants, a Jewish mother leaves her child in the care of a priest at a Catholic school in France. Although the child does not want to go, the mother tells him to do all that the priest says, and tearfully bids him farewell for the last time.<sup>43</sup>

Saying goodbye to a child is hard enough, but making a decision to kill an infant to save the whole group is entirely unimaginable. The situation presented itself to a woman in the company of Byrna Bar Oni, who lived in hiding with a group of partisans in the forests of Poland. One woman's baby would not be quiet so she choked it to death without thinking twice. Bar Oni goes on to explain how the other mothers, who at first tried to stop this woman, themselves became "engulfed in some unexplainable madness" and began choking and smothering their own babies to death.<sup>44</sup>

Jeannette Ballard's experience in hiding differed greatly from any of the other women's documented cases. A German Jew, Ballard found her way to Le Chambon, a small village in the south of France. The village's uniqueness stemmed from the fact that the entire town harbored Jews.<sup>45</sup> In this setting, Ballard grew up without any major upheavals, even participating in the social scene and dating. She met a French Jew also in hiding and married him following the war. They remain close to the people of Le Chambon, who treated them as though they were their own children.<sup>46</sup>

The fact that many Jews went into hiding helps to discredit the fact that Jews remained unaware of their fate at the hands of the Nazis and did nothing to avoid it. Vera Laska comments that, "the people in hiding...were the unsung heroines of the cataclysm of World War II."<sup>47</sup> They knew the risks involved in going into hiding yet accepted the challenge of survival with courage. Women went into hiding with fear and a sense of not

knowing what the day may hold. They experienced great feelings of guilt when thinking about their friends and family members being taken away to the camps. Young women, such as Anne Frank and Marilla Feld, struggled with growing up before their time. Each woman sacrificed and dealt with uncertainty on a daily basis. There remained little time or energy to worry about retaining their uniqueness as women, their strength had to focus on survival.

### III. Women in the Camps

For thousands of Jewish women, the Final Solution of the Nazis led them to one of the concentration camps established in Eastern Europe. Early in the war, camps such as Theresienstadt and Dora were set up as internment or forced labor camps. Following the Wannese Conference of January 1942, new, destructive killing centers were established by the Nazis at Auschwitz and Sobibor.<sup>48</sup> At these places the ultimate goal of the Nazis was to kill as many people as possible.

The experiences in the concentration camps differed between men and women. Gender played a prominent role in studying the testimonies. Generally, women are repeatedly portrayed by society as the weaker of the two sexes. In the case of the internment of the Jews, a strong case can be made to the contrary. Lenie de Jong-van Naarden states, "women seem to have greater endurance, to take orders less to heart, and perhaps they are a bit more independent," referring to women whom she

met in the camps who had been captured with their whole families and were the only ones to survive.<sup>49</sup> Although exposed to brutality and humiliation attacking their very womanhood at the hands of the Nazis, many women found the strength and perseverance to survive.

One of the most shocking experiences for the women came upon their initial arrival at the camps. Grippled with fear and confusion, these women were faced with an unimaginable scene-- dead and nearly dead bodies being piled into carts, officers yelling orders, and SS officials making the infamous selections. Women under 16 and over 40 and the physically and mentally unfit were pushed to the left while the other women went to the right. The whole time the SS guards reassured separated families that they would all be cared for and they would see each other in a little while. That was the last time many of these women ever saw their families.

Even though the officers claimed that the women being pushed to the left would eventually be reunited with their loved ones, some women knew this was not true and responded quickly enough to lie about their age so that they could stay with family members. Maybe intuition guided them; perhaps by the last years of the war some people had begun to believe the rumors of the death camps. Whatever the motives, many women managed to stay together. Upon her arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Judith Isaacson remembers getting off the transport with her mother and aunt, "Stay together, she [her mother] grabbed my hand. 'Stay together.' It was a command that

was to guide us through the months ahead."<sup>50</sup> Judith, unlike many of her cohorts was lucky to remain with her mother throughout her tenure in the camp.

The humiliation of the camps carried particular burdens for women. Degradation of the body assaulted cultural ideals of female modesty. Many of the women could not believe what was happening to them. Bloeme Evers-Emden recalls:

Then we were taken to rooms where we had to undress. That was an enormous shock for me. I was 18, shy, and had been brought up chastely, according to the prevailing morality. It goes without saying I was embarrassed and ashamed. I remember an audible crack in my head from being totally naked before the eyes of men.<sup>51</sup>

The Nazis took great pride in such actions, planning to break the spirit of the women right from the start. Other women also experienced the violation of their womanhood by the Nazis. When lined up completely naked following the showers:

As they stood quivering and huddling to hide their nakedness, their modesty was further violated by the SS men who arrived for their bonus show. They made leud remarks, pointed at them, commented of their shapes made obscene suggestions...It was the most shocking of all the shocks, a deep blow to their very womanhood.<sup>52</sup>

The dehumanization of the women would continue throughout their tenure at the camps.

There is an old saying, "your hair is your crowing glory." The Nazis kept this on mind when they carried out the next phase of dehumanizing the new female arrivals. Jewish women had their heads shaved both to eliminate lice and to degrade them further. The result of the shaving was incomprehensible for some of the new women. "I gasped at the shorn prisoners. All men I thought," recalls Judith Isaacson.<sup>53</sup> She was unaware that she

was in a room full of women including her mother. When she finally realized it she laments, 'was it a mere hairstyle that made her feminine?'<sup>54</sup> The question is a viable one because in modern society so much emphasis is placed upon a woman's outward appearance as being a sign of her worth. When a woman is stripped of this outside beauty is something also taken away from the spirit? In the case of women in the camps, it seems as though the adjustment to the degradation was one of the keys to survival.

Some women consciously attempted to alleviate their physical degradation and make themselves just a little bit feminine. Although shaved bald, dressed in rags and emaciated, women found ways to assert their femininity. Sometimes women would give up a ration of bread for an extra piece of cloth to fashion an accessory. A group of French young women, upon their arrival at Auschwitz, found a piece of glass and a broken comb with which to primp themselves, although they had already been shaved. They then tied bits of cloth around their heads 'to see if they weren't still a little bit elegant.'<sup>55</sup> Appearances, even under the atrocious conditions of the camps, still mattered to a great number of Jewish women, for appearances helped the women hold onto their femininity.

Another method of dehumanization came through the assigning of numbers to the incarcerated. The Nazis attempted to turn the women into non-entities by stripping them of their identities. It became a tool used in breaking the spirit of the women who had lost so much already. Some women's bonds appeared stronger



than others, such as the case of Bloeme Evers-Emden who comments, "had I become a number just because I had a number on my arm? Not for a minute...I was still Bloeme Emden."<sup>56</sup>

Menstruation presented a unique problem to the female inmates of the camps. Every female prisoner had a problem dealing with the menstrual cycle at some point of their internment. For the Nazis, a woman's menstrual cycle was another opportunity to degrade women at the very base of their femininity. Many women arrived at the camps while menstruating and soon encountered one of the most humiliating experiences of their lives.

Stripped of all dignity, many of the women stood bleeding and naked. Ronnie Goldstein-van Cleef, a teenager when she arrived at the camps states:

Just like many women I was menstruating. I thought- Even if it's crazy- I'm keeping my underpants on. But a Nazi came up to me and said...'take off those pants', and I said, 'No!' He hit me on the head, and then I did take those panties off. I wore a sanitary belt, and he came back to me and tore the belt off. Then I thought, This is the end.<sup>57</sup>

Van Cleef, like many of her cohorts, shaken and disoriented, could not begin to fathom the extent of the situation. They knew, however, that their femininity was being desecrated by the Nazis.

Most women ceased to have their periods as their stay in the camps progressed. Vera Laska suggests that bromide was added to the soup to stop the periods.<sup>58</sup> A more common sense idea goes along with the fact that given the low caloric intake of the women, biology does not allow for menstruation at such a

level. Whatever the case, women were deprived of the most natural feminine function--menstruation.

The degradation of Jewish women by the Nazis did not stop at emotional abuse. The cruelty of the SS officials at the camps was widespread. One of the most famous SS guards, Irma Grise, would take great pride in cutting women's breasts open with a whip.<sup>59</sup> Receiving great pleasure from such behavior, Grise was simultaneously physically injuring her prisoners and degrading them in front of an audience as well.

Rape is an act of violence, not of sex. It seems natural then that there would have been a large percentage of rapes by SS guards against Jewish women in the camps. It would further humiliate the prisoners and degrade them on the most personal of levels. Surprisingly, however, the incidence of rape remained quite low. Different explanations have been hypothesized as to why rapes did not occur on a regular basis. Most importantly, SS guards could be severely punished for having sexual relations with a member of an 'inferior' race. There was little need to take such a risk since most of the camps provided brothels for entertainment.<sup>60</sup> In addition, guards at many of the camps consisted of both males and females who could keep each other well occupied.

Looking at the Jewish women and the physical condition they were in it is not surprising that more of them did not experience rape. 'Our clothing was threadbare and we looked anything but attractive. No wonder the SS did not molest us sexually,' comments Zdenka Morsel.<sup>61</sup> The women were dirty,

smelly and emaciated, many times no longer even resembling women.

Although the actuality of rape of Jewish women remained low, the fear of it happening prevailed in the minds of many Jewish women in the camps. Judith Isaacson dwells on this quite a bit in her novel Seed of Sarah. She keeps repeating the idea of submission as the safest way for a woman to act in the case of an attack.<sup>62</sup> She also heard of the rapes that Nazis committed against Jewish women transported to the front and then killed and wanted to prepare herself if that should occur.<sup>63</sup>

At the same time the Nazis concentrated on annihilating the Jewish race, they also conducted numerous experiments on how to better breed the 'master race'--the Aryans. Jewish women became the guinea pigs of these experiments, especially in the areas of fertilization and sterilization.

Dr. Joseph Mengele, known to millions as the 'angel of death', along with his job performing the selections at Auschwitz, took great pride in the medical research he headed at the camp, especially in the area of twins. A set of these twins, who knew they would be put to death when Mengele finished with them, told their story to Vera Laska. Their experience mirrors many of the other women's who were forced to undergo the operations, mostly without anesthesia. Mengele forced them into intercourse with twin men to see if the offspring would also be twins.<sup>64</sup> Using the data, which to say the least was unscientific, Mengele hoped to populate the Reich with amazing speed and precision.

The sterilization process experimented upon the women was one of the most brutal and destructive. Early on the process, X-rays were used on both men and women, causing great pain and suffering before death.<sup>65</sup> The revolution of sterilization followed. Started by Dr. Clauberg, his new method of non-surgical sterilization discovered in Auschwitz could sterilize 1000 women a day (with the help of an assistant). What resulted from the claim was doctors began betting each other as to who could actually perform more sterilizations in one day, at the price of their female victims.

In addition to all the suffering and degradation experienced in the camps, mothers faced an even more difficult challenge. The cultural norms of mothering; nurture and protection, were stripped from the mothers in the camps. In the concentration camps women faced the choice of living or escorting their children to the crematoriums, the ultimate perversion of a mother's nurturing role. Many chose death, Simon Wiesenthal explains, "to ease the children's anxieties and alleviate the boundless dread of death."<sup>66</sup> Even though they gave up their own lives, they at least knew that they comforted their children when they needed them most. No human being should be faced with such a decision and a judgement cannot be made as to whether the mothers who went with their children were better mothers than those who chose to live.

For those that did not go with their children to the crematorium, many experienced immense guilt after the war was over because of the choice they had made. Lenie de Jong

van-Naarden remembers survivors who suffered more because they were alive than if they would have gone with their families to their deaths.<sup>67</sup> Survivors get caught in the rut of asking the questions 'why her and not me?' which cannot be answered. A more healthy idea would be to take their life as a blessing and a way to keep the deceased alive through their memory which lives on in the heart of the mother.

Women who were unfortunate enough to have been pregnant before being interned experienced one of the most difficult situations. It was hard enough to hide the condition from the guards and virtually impossible to save the baby's life once it was born. In some cases both the mother and child went to the gas chambers. Other times, the identity of the mother remained hidden with the help of other female inmates by separating the mother and child immediately following the birth, in which case only the child died. In either case, the trauma of the experience weighed heavily not just on the mother, but on her comrades as well.

Recalling one of the concentration camp births she witnessed, Isabella Leitner remembers:

And now that you are born, your mother begs to see you, to hold you. But we know that if we give you to her, there will be a struggle to take you away again, so we cannot let her see you because you don't belong to her. You belong to the gas chamber.<sup>68</sup>

The description may seem harsh and cruel, but it became a fact of life for women in the camps to depersonalize things in order to survive. By not allowing the mother to hold her newborn baby, she is denied the chance to bond with the child. In the

future, however, this lack of bonding will actually help her survive by alleviating the suffering and pain of breaking the bond and nurturing the mother instinctively wants to give the child, when in fact the child is doomed to death from the beginning.

Initially, women may have been able to harden themselves and been able to accept the fate of their loved ones. For some of the women, the pain grew too much to bear. Some lost their minds, others threw themselves against the electric fence.<sup>69</sup> Other women turned their emotions to young women that they met, acting as adopted mothers. This would fulfill the void that they experienced by losing their own loved ones and at the same time become a comfort to girls that were alone.

The camps generally divided men from women. This isolation greatly diminished the contact between the two sexes, including sexual relations. Although the outside world may perceive the lack of sex as unnatural and a great hardship, the actual case was quite the contrary. Biologically, when a person is starved, the sex drive diminishes greatly. Also, "the instinct for survival, the primary concern for maintaining one's body alive by supplying it with food took precedence over any other instinct, including the sexual one."<sup>70</sup> William Stryon takes the point one step further by pointing out, "sex is rarely a life force; that repressions, perversions and exploitations often prevent the natural expression of sexuality in modern civilization."<sup>71</sup> The perversion Stryon talks about is certainly present in the concentration camps.

Lesbianism in the camps has not been fully explored for the simple reason that until women who participated in this behavior come forward, there is little or no way to document it. Although it is feasible that some women did seek sexual relations with members of the same sex, there is little concrete evidence to back it up.

Another idea that has not been explored is based upon the notion of homo-social relations, a quite common ideal of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Vera Laska attempts to address the issue by saying:

Endless months or years of living without psychological or physical love, in the constant shadow of death where the slightest move could land one in the gas chambers, compelled many women to the only sexual outlet available to them, that is, an erotic tie with a person of their own sex.<sup>72</sup>

Women developed great love and affection for one another in the camps, that much is true, but the love did not have to be expressed in the stigmatized thinking of the late twentieth century. Having someone to hold at night, amid the confusion and uncertainty of the next day, came as a great comfort to many of the women.

The development of bonds between the Jewish women of the concentration became a leading life force for many. Faced with loneliness and fear, the fact that a commonality existed among the women instilled a new sense of hope. For other women it was the idea that families would be kept together at any price that made life worth living. As Elsa Pollack says, "the bond, something that you cannot explain, could not be broken."<sup>73</sup>

The bonds also helped the women retain their dignity. "Our mutual bonds as 'sisters' and 'mothers' were strengthened by the respect we bore each other and the courtesy we showed each other."<sup>74</sup> Despite the degradation and dehumanization imposed upon by the Nazis, women kept each other going--in both mind and spirit.

In other camps and situations, the bonds discussed above were not present. Women here were hardened and looked out for only themselves. "We were set against each other and the closest relatives would begrudge each other for a few potato peels...You became dehumanized in spite of yourself."<sup>75</sup>

Even women with strong family bonds began to break away as a means of survival. The burden for some trying to maintain their whole family became an inner struggle between the responsibility to self and to others, explained by Isabella Leitner, who entered the concentration camp with her four sisters:

If you are sisterless, you do not have the pressure, the absolute responsibility to end the day alive. How many times did that responsibility keep us alive?...I can only say that many times when I was caught in a selection I knew I had to get back to my sisters, even when I was too tired to fight back...The burden was mine, and it was awesome.<sup>76</sup>

Many women's sense of community and love were destroyed both by the Nazis and by losses of family members. When there was no love left, many bodies perished when the emotional will no longer remained to sustain them. Perhaps that is why the Frank sisters, Anne and Margot, died only days apart and just weeks prior to the liberation of Bergen-Belsen.



The women who had no emotional ties should not be portrayed as monsters or heartless, their physical instinct just became more powerful than their emotional one. Or as Leitner says, "Must we all die unless we all survive? We must learn to break the bond...Our pact must end, else none will be left."<sup>77</sup> The idea that someone must survive to tell the story of the others resounded throughout the camps. Women shared their experiences with each other in order for them to be preserved when they are gone.

Were women better suited for the conditions of the concentration camps? Although a greater percentage of women went directly to the gas chambers than their male counterparts, an argument can be made that their historic precedent of being better in touch with their emotions made it easier for the women to adapt to their surroundings. Being able to confront and deal with inner feelings is an essential quality to a productive life, no matter what the conditions. The certain "survival skills" that Claudia Koontz brings up are never fully explored, but through the personal testimonies it seems the prevailing ideas of the will to live have strong ties to the female race.<sup>78</sup>

Gender played a vital role in the experience of Jewish women in the Holocaust. They used their femininity in the fight for the resistance. They struggled with maintaining their identities as women while under the strict confines of hiding. Women who were degraded and dehumanized through the brutality of the Nazis found new and inventive means to assert their

femininity and natural instincts as mothers in the concentration camps. They stood together as females to triumph over the enemy while retaining their womanhood.

Throughout history women have been portrayed as particular victims of the violence of warfare. This not only stigmatizes women as weaker and unable to fend off the attacks on them, but also depersonalizes men as expendable in the war equation. Regardless of their gender, men and women are first and foremost human beings whose lives are precious and should not be wasted.

The images coming out of Bosnia today eerily mirror the experiences of Jewish women over fifty years ago. Gang rape is attacking women at the very heart of their womanhood. Mothers are pictured holding up their babies, a sign that they are attempting to save their lives from the onslaught of war. Why are images of women always coming to the forefront? Is it society's perception that women need to be constantly protected? In modern society, all of civilization have become equal targets of war. No longer are the soliders on the battlefield the only casualties.

Because of their gender, women will continue to have unique experiences. What may happen, however, is that although their experiences will remain unique, society's perception may change. In a world fighting for equality of all people and feminism, women continue to be seen as the weaker sex. The testimonies of the Jewish women of the Holocaust, if studied, should discredit that notion. As the stories of Bosnia and other war torn parts of the world emerge, maybe more and more credit will be given to

the strength and courage of the female race where it is rightly deserved.

## Endnotes

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